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AUTHOR Byrd, Marquita L.
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ABSTRACT

This keynote address discusses ways undergraduate education is changing in terms of the diversity of students, financing education, and time required for graduation. How these changes affect academic advisers is the focus of the piece. The article is a response to a college administrator's charge to advisers to adapt to the new face of undergraduate education. Administrators are asking that advisers help students choose majors earlier and for advisers to discourage students from dropping classes as a method of grade point manipulation. It is suggested that faculty be equipped for their task of advising by providing them with systematic in-service training and by making advising an official and evaluated aspect of faculty responsibility. Faculty, it is argued, usually have no way of documenting time spent in advising, nor do they have methods for verifying effectiveness or for gathering data that would be useful in improving their advising skills. Without reliable methods of assessing advising for tenure purposes, faculty essentially provide a service to the university for which they are not compensated. (RJM)

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Academic Advising Ain't What It Used To Be: Strangers in the University

Abstract

In this keynote address Byrd discussed the way undergraduate education is changing in terms of the diversity of students, financing of education, and time required for graduation, and she considered how these changes impact the job of academic advisors. In response to college administrators' charge to advisors to adapt to the new face of undergraduate education, Byrd suggested equipping faculty for their task of advising by providing specific training and by making advising an official and evaluated aspect of faculty responsibility.

Running Head: Trends in Academic Advising

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Author: Marquita L. Byrd
One Washington Square
Communication Studies Department
San Jose State University
San Jose, CA 95121-0112
(408) 924-5385 (W)
(408) 924-5396 Fax

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Keynote address delivered at the 1994 National Academic Advisors Association Convention in Las Vegas, Nevada.

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In this keynote address Byrd discussed the way undergraduate education is changing in terms of the diversity of students, financing of education, and time required for graduation, and she considered how these changes impact the job of academic advisors. In response to college administrators' charge to advisors to adapt to the new face of undergraduate education, Byrd suggested equipping faculty for their task of advising by providing specific training and by making advising an official and evaluated aspect of faculty responsibility.

Introduction

I chose the subject of this talk because over the past twenty-four years as a member of the academy in both student and faculty roles, I have seen many changes take place on college campuses. When college student populations were fairly homogeneous--predominately male, predominately black or white due to segregation, predominately housed in residence halls, and predominately focused on academics with limited work responsibilities--the academic advisor had a tough job, but worked with a somewhat predictable number of variables. In the 90's the demographics of the student body have changed, the issues facing the students have changed, and the advising process has changed in order to meet these new challenges; hence the title "academic advising ain't what it used to be."

My own academic advising experiences over the last twenty-four years are many and varied. I began functioning as an advisor as a junior in college in my role as a Registered Assistant (R.A.) at Central Missouri State University. At that time there was no training for the R.A., just an orientation to acquaint us with what was still called the "dormitory" and to warn us of what to watch for. Basically, the R.A. was the long arm of the university placed in the residence halls to enforce the rules, arbitrate disputes, aid in record keeping, and report to the housemother. It was in this capacity that I began to teach other students how to calculate G.P.A.'s and how to manage their time in order to balance classes, homework, and social life. Of course there was a great deal of personal counselling involved as well.

I continued my role as an advisor through my M.A. and Ph.D. programs because I was a teaching assistant for those six years. In the role of teaching assistant I primarily advised students about the classes I taught, but other academic and personal topics always came up, increasing my advising experience.

There are two other advising experiences in my past that

helped to shape my notion of what advising is all about. These occurred at the University of Houston-Downtown (UHD) and at Southeast Missouri State University (SEMO). At UHD, in the early 80's, the faculty handled class enrollment without the aid of on-line registration. The campus had an open admissions policy with at least 50% of the students requiring remediation in basic skills, perhaps 2 to 5% children of migrant workers, and a third of the students falling in the international category.

> Imagine this: I'm sitting in a large room with rows of class cards on tables and computer printouts taped to the walls showing classes and sections that are open. In walks an international student who just arrived in the United States two days before. The student has a transcript which is in English, but is still uninterpretable because it has not been assessed in terms of the value and meaning of the course titles and units at our university. Furthermore, the student has no Tofel scores. In the space of twenty minutes I have to access the student's English proficiency, roughly determine her classification, find available courses that will actually fit her program, and convince her that it would be unwise to enroll in 21 units for her first semester in the university. Here I experienced my baptism by fire into the world of academic advising.

Lastly, at SEMO I was trained to advise incoming freshman in the summer orientation program. The program consisted of two and a half days spent with groups of 12-15 students teaching them everything from how to read the class schedule to the importance of actually attending class on a regular basis. My student assistant and I were with these students from the initial on-campus testing for basic skills in English, Math, and Writing until the end of the session when we actually enrolled them into the first semester of classes using data from SAT scores, high school ranks, scores for the initial testing, and information gleaned from conversations with them. I was with this program for two summers. Presently I am a departmental advisor at San Jose State University in Communication Studies. So you see my advising experiences have both breadth and depth.

Now, let's take a look at the two most important concepts in the title, <u>advising</u> and <u>stranger</u>. An advisor is one who guides, imparts knowledge, leads, and ultimately helps others become self-sufficient and independent. An advisor can introduce one to new experiences and help one become acclimated to new situations. In addition to these general advising functions, specifically academic advising will:

> of necessity--involve planning schedules, choosing majors, and explaining curriculum requirements for the major. It will involve teaching students the proper clerical functions to effect their favorable progress through the institution. It will touch on personal adjustment and career choice issues. Finally, good academic advising will teach students how to

locate appropriate specialized services such as financial aid, career counseling, and personal counseling when these services are deemed necessary. (Wall 1988 70)

As you can see from this definition, academic advising is a highly complex task designed to meet a multiplicity of goals.

The second important concept in the title is stranger. Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary defines stranger as a newcomer in a place or locality, an outsider, one who is unacquainted with or unaccustomed to something, one who is not a member of the family group, like a visitor or one who is not privy or party to an act. This definition has inherent in it the notions of disconnectedness, unfamiliarity, and being out of place.

The Problem

Diversification of the Student Body

How are the concepts of advisor and stranger related? Well, it is the job of the advisor to lead and guide and the stranger is in need of these services. The problem that we are facing today in higher education is that we have more and more students in the university who fit this "stranger" category and not enough resources available to provide effective advising. While all incoming students are initially strangers to the university because it is a new environment for them, there are students who feel more out-of-place than others. Traditional students tend to adjust more quickly to the college environment than non-traditional students because it was designed for them. Based on comments made during class discussions, advising sessions, and personal conversations many non-traditional students report feelings of "out-of-placeness" long after the initial cultural shock of entering college, into the senior year and through graduation.

As university and college student populations have diversified, every campus finds itself with more people that the original system was not designed to accommodate. Only 20% of the college student population continues to fit the "traditional" category, that is, the full-time student living in a residence hall who is 22 years old or younger (Levine 1994). The overwhelming majority of students, 80%, are classified as "non-traditional." The groups of people in the non-traditional category are many. They include those who are returning to school after a number of years in the work force; women who work, international students; the new older student; first generation college attenders; students of colour; out gay and lesbian students; and a higher percentage of disabled students.

As we, professional and faculty advisors, attempt to prepare all of these students for successful matriculation through the university, our jobs have expanded and the types of information we need have increased. For example, we need to understand the cultures from which students come, the changing job market, and

even issues concerning housing. I now know that it might be best not to advise a female from a traditional Middle Eastern family to take a night class. I have learned that the competition for grades is spiraling higher because the job market is tighter. And over the past six years I have had to contemplate more than once the impact of homelessness on an advisee.

Student Loans

Not only has the student body changed, but the way students finance higher education has changed. A recent article in the San Jose Mercury News reported that students today are having to borrow more money than they have in the past in order to complete a four year degree (Ostrom 1994). In the state of California alone, 1.7 billion dollars were loaned to students in 1993, one half billion more than the previous year. The number of students receiving federally guaranteed loans has doubled in the past five years with the average student owing $15,000 with a pay back of $200.00 per month over a ten year period (Ostrom).

Extended Matriculation

Besides borrowing more money, students are taking longer to graduate. The problem with this is that enrollment is on the upswing at a time when sharp cuts in tax dollars have reduced the number of available seats in the academy (Newman 1994). According to the Western Interstate Commission for higher Education, the number of high school graduates nationwide will increase to 3.3 million in the year 2008, up from 2.5 million last year (Kennedy 1994). The expected "tidal wave II" is in the tenth grade now, the offspring of the baby bloomers (Kennedy 1994). This trend towards longer matriculations is stimulated by several developments in higher education including fewer classes being offered and more students working. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, less than one third of the class of 1990 earned undergraduate degrees in four years (Newman). This represents a 45% drop since 1977 in people earning undergraduate degrees in four years. Only 26% of the class of 1990 will graduate in five years, 11% in six years and a full 32% will take more than six years to graduate (Newman 1994).

These changes in the manner in which college educations are financed and the length of time it takes to complete them will have several consequences. One consequence might be that students will choose majors and occupations that will enable them to pay off loans. This means steering away from teaching, social work, and graduate school, post-bachelor options which may not pay enough to retire the debt from student loans in a reasonable amount of time. According to Richard Carlson, an economist for the state of California, hugh students loans after college will reduce credit lines for consumer items such as houses and cars, two industries that stimulate the economy (Ostrom 1994).

Greater student loan debts become an issue in advising because

students tend to have an unrealistic picture of financial prospects after college. They tend to over estimate the amount of money they will make after school and under estimate the amount of money it will take them live on. Students create great after school debts without a clear understanding of how this will impact on the quality of their lives after school. I have found it necessary to have serious talks with students who are meandering through school, borrowing large amounts of money and majoring in areas where job prospects and salaries are depressed. Two-hundred dollars a month for student loans sounds manageable when one lives the life of a student expecting to make double or triple what she is living on when in school.

I have encountered several instances when I have had to advise students about the realities of living with student loan debt. There are times when these students change their matriculation tactics after confronting this reality. After school debt and quality of life after graduation are issues that directly effect the post-bachelor life of today's student. As a teacher and an academic advisor in the 80's and 90's I have found myself addressing these issues frequently.

How Are We Effected?

What does all this have to do with the academic advisor? Plenty. With these issues at the forefront, college and university administrators are asking academic advisors to implement several measures. They include helping students to choose majors earlier and discouraging them from dropping classes as a method of G.P.A. manipulation.

Three other measures have been suggested that, while not under the jurisdiction of advisors, would change their work schedules and bring added pressures from students. These following policy changes would come from faculty senates and governing boards of institutions of higher learning: (1) prevent students from repeating elective courses for better grades, (2) charging by the semester rather than course load, and (3) extending the academic year with less summer and Christmas time off (Newman).

The statistical trends indicate an increase in the student population which means more students per advisor to work with. A greater push by administrators for less matriculation time will results in more job stresses for the advisor. Fewer resources such as money, courses, and staff will create more anxiety among students and this will be evidenced in student-advisor interactions. And lastly greater student diversity will require that advisors be cognizant of how the demographic characteristics of a student might impact on his/her classroom experience and matriculation path through the university.

These trends and the measures college administrators are suggesting will mean a tougher job for academic advisors in the 21st century. Academic advisors will be asked to move more

students through the system faster with fewer resources. How can we be motivated to achieve these goals and execute them effectively?

Academic Departments: What They Can Do

First, faculty advisors need more training. I've taught at five universities ranging in size from 10,000 to 20,000 all of which identified teaching as the primary mission of the institution. Not one of these schools provided systematic training in academic advising for the faculty. In other words, as students move to upper-division courses and prepare for graduation, they get advising from the least trained advisors on campus: faculty. Two of the chief complaints of students in a survey of satisfaction with advising services were (a) uncaring and inattentive faculty advisors and (b) bad advice from people who were supposed to know better (Hansen & Raney 1993). These things can easily be rectified with in-service training by departments.

A second method of preparing and motivating advisors for the difficult days ahead is to develop instruments and procedures which would allow easy, quick, and reliable assessment of advising effectiveness (Ramos 1993). While there are some advising offices that use objective methods of assessing effectiveness, I have yet to see any academic department assess the effectiveness of faculty advising. For the most part, faculty have no way of documenting time spent in advising, nor do they have methods for verifying effectiveness or gathering data that would be useful in improving their advising skills. At most state institutions, one fifth of the teaching load is devoted to academic advising. However, without reliable methods of documenting and assessing advising for retention and tenure purposes, faculty essentially provide a service to students and the university for which they are not compensated. Furthermore, there is no way to reward excellence in advising except by popularity contest such as outstanding teacher awards. This does not encourage the faculty to strive for excellence in advising.

Conclusion

Training faculty advisors and developing methods of assessing and rewarding excellence in advising are but two steps to be taken to improve the field as a profession. There are other steps that can be taken to improve the lot of the academic advisor and NACADA is the vanguard in that area. NACADA has been at the forefront of promoting the professional status of academic advising, setting guidelines for better training, and underscoring the vital role that academic advising plays in the life of the academy. With NACADA providing leadership in academic advising into the 21st century, we will see fewer "strangers" on our campuses and more students that are fully integrated into the academic community. No, academic advising ain't what it used to be, but with the help of NACADA it can evolve into what it should be. NACADA, I salute your work.

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